1899

The Survival of African Music in America

by Jeanette Robinson Murphy

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In 1895 the Southern Workman *editors had asked their readers to contribute African survivals, but they never pursued the subject further. This is one of the first articles to link explicitly African and American Negro singing styles and customs. In addition, Miss Murphy offers interesting examples of conjure, sending messages by the dead, and commentary on preaching, animal tales, the attitude of the folk toward their folklore, and by her own example gives us a specific instance of Negro-to-white transmission of folklore material and style. The influence of the Negro on American folklore has been extensive, but the channels of transmission are frequently hard to isolate. For this reason, her description of how she learned and performed Negro material is of some importance.*

Fifty years from now, when every vestige of slavery has disappeared, and even its existence has become a fading memory, America, and probably Europe, will suddenly awake to the sad fact that we have irrevocably lost a veritable mine of wealth through our failure to appreciate and study from a musician's standpoint the beautiful African music, whose rich stores will then have gone forever from our grasp.

During my childhood my observations were centered upon a few very old negroes who came directly from Africa, and upon many others whose parents were African born, and I early came to the conclusion, based upon negro authority, that the greater part of their music, their methods, their scale, their type of thought, their dancing, their patting of feet, their clapping of hands, their grimaces and pantomime, and their gross superstitions came straight from Africa.

Some of their later songs, it is true, we must technically call "modified African," but how far the original African song elements have been altered (and usually not for the better) by contact with Ameri-

can life is a question of fact, and can only be settled by a careful comparison of the songs as sung among the natives of Africa and the changed forms in which their modified ones are found today in the South. It must be determined in each case, and cannot be settled by any general theory or formula.

This question of the classification of African music has given rise to more or less discussion. It seems hardly just to call the genuine negro songs "the folk songs of America." We are a conglomerate people, and no one race can claim a monopoly in this matter. English, Scotch, German, French, Italians, and others have brought their own music and their own folklore, and in each case it must be considered distinctly belonging to the nationality that imported it. Why should not the same be true of the genuine negro music? The stock is African, the ideas are African, the patting and dancing are all African. The veneer of civilization and religious fervor and Bible truth is entirely superficial. The African is under it all, and those who study him and his weird music at short range have no difficulty in recalling the savage conditions that gave it birth.

Were I to begin now the study of all the intonations and tortuous quavers of this beautiful music, I fear I should be able to do little toward imitating it; for it was only possible to catch the spirit of it and the reason of it all while my voice had the flexibility of childhood, and the influences of slavery were still potent factors in the daily life of the negroes. I followed these old ex-slaves, who have passed away, in their tasks, listened to their crooning in their cabins, in the fields, and especially in their meeting houses, and again and again they assured me the tunes they sang came from Africa.

Possibly I have an unusual predilection for this imported African music, but to me some of the strange, weird, untamable, barbaric melodies have a rude beauty and a charm beside which, as Cowper says—

> Italian trills are tame.

It is indeed hard to account for the strange misconceptions which prevail as to what really constitutes genuine African music. The "coon songs" which are so generally sung are base imitations. The white man does not live who can write a genuine negro song. At home there used to be a rare old singer, an old Kentucky mammy, whom everybody loved. She once said:

Us ole heads use ter make 'em up on de spurn of de moment, arter we wrassle wid de Sperit and come thoo. But the tunes was brung from Africa by our granddaddies. Dey was jis 'miliar songs. Dese days dey calls 'em ballots,

but in de ole days dey call 'em spirituals, case de Holy Spirit done revealed 'em to 'em. Some say Moss Jesus taught 'em, and I's seed 'em start in meetin'. We'd all be at the "prayer house" de Lord's Day, and de white preacher he'd splain de word and read whar Ezekial done say—

Dry bones gwine ter lib ergin.

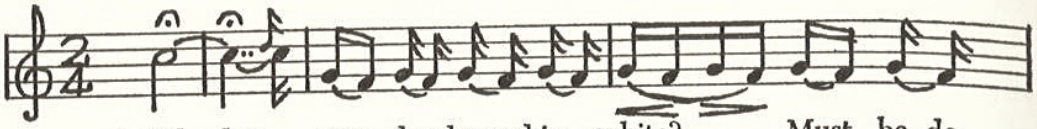
And, honey, de Lord would come a-shining' thoo dem pages and revive dis ole nigger's heart, and I'd jump up dar and den and holler and shout and sing and pat, and dey would all cotch de words and I'd sing it to some ole shout song I'd heard 'em sing from Africa, and dey'd all take it up and keep at it, and keep a-addin' to it, and den it would be a spiritual. Dese spirituals am de best moanin' music in de world, case dey is de whole Bible sung out and out. Notes is good enough for you people, but us likes a mixtery. Dese young heads ain't wuth killin', fur dey don't keer bout de Bible nor de ole hymns. Dey's completely spiled wid too much white blood in 'em, and de big organ and de eddication has done took all de Holy Spirit out en 'em, till dey ain't no better wid der dances and cuttin' up dan de white folks.

The negro usually sang religious music at his work. He was often turned out of church for crossing his feet or singing a "fiddle sing," which is a secular song, but he could steal all the chickens he wanted and never fall from grace. One of the most persistent fancies that the old slaves cherished was that they were the oppressed Israelites, that the Southerners were the cruel Egyptians, and that Canaan was freedom. Bondage was of course their slavery. They believed that some day the Red Sea would come in a sea of blood, which was verified in the civil war. In many of their songs they appropriate Bible prophecies and ideas to themselves. The first song given is a characteristic one, illustrating many peculiarities; and if it did not come from Africa, where did it come from?

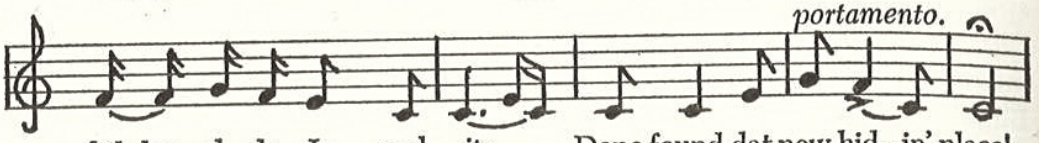
It is often asserted at the North that, as a rule, the negro was punished if he prayed or received religious instruction. On the contrary, many fine plantations had their "prayer houses," where a white minister was employed to hold services and to instruct them in the Bible. In nearly every section they were permitted and encouraged to hold their own meetings. That this is true is attested by these same thousands of "spirituals," all of which are filled with Bible texts. Some of the most devout Christians were, and are yet, the old "mammies" and "uncles" who lived all the closer to the heavenly Father because of their simplicity and lack of learning. The deeply religious and better class of old negroes maintain that the reason that this music is so fascinating to whites and blacks is because it is God's own music inspired by the Holy Spirit. There is indeed a wonderful power in some of

these songs, and the charm undoubtedly lies in the fact that they are founded on Bible texts.

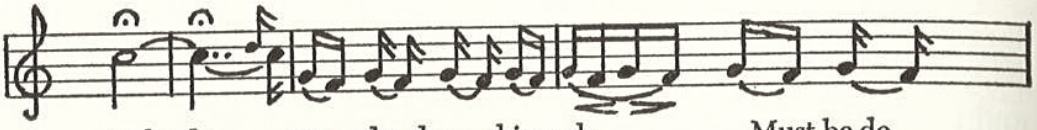
DONE FOUND DAT NEW HIDIN' PLACE



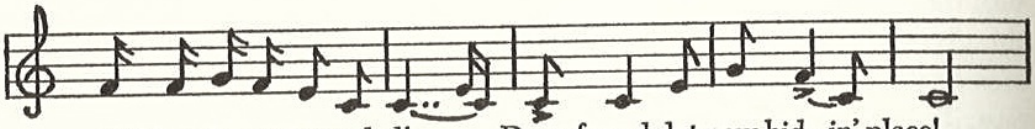
1. Who dat . . yon - der dressed in white? . . Must be de
2. Who dat . . yon - der dressed in black? . . Must be de
3. Jes on-ly could see lee-tle ba - by to - day— . . An - gel done
4. When I was down in E - gypt's land, . . Heard a mighty



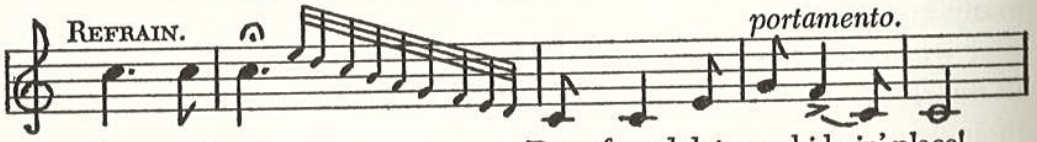
chil- lun ob de Is - rael - ite . . . Done found dat new hid - in' place!
nig - gers a - turn-in' back! Done found dat new hid - in' place!
drug her thoo de twelve pearly gates! Done found dat new hid - in' place!
talkin' 'bout de promised land— Done found dat new hid - in' place!



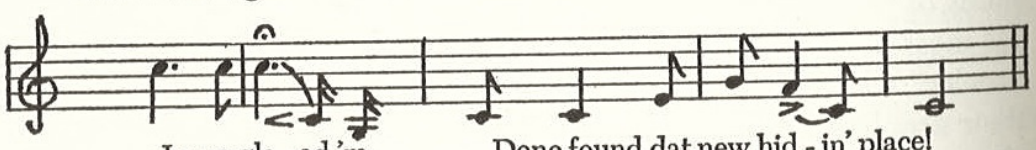
Who dat . . yon - der dressed in red- . . . . Must be de
God don't talk like a nat-er - al man— . . . Talk so a
Pur - ti - est ting what eb-ber I done. . . . Was to
And when we get on Ca - naan's shore . . . We'll



chil-lun dat a Mos-es led! . . Done found dat new hid - in' place!
sin-ner can a - un-der - stand— Done found dat new hid - in' place!
git religion when I was young— Done found dat new hid - in' place!
shout and sing for-eb-ber more— Done found dat new hid - in' place!



Come a - long— Done found dat new hid - in' place!



Ise so gla - ad 'm Done found dat new hid - in' place!

No one questions the remarkable hold the genuine negro music has upon the Anglo-Saxon race, as is evidenced by the success of the

Jubilee singers years ago and of the Hampton students now. The negroes have simply used the weird African melodies as a fascinating vehicle for Bible truths.

Most students of English hymnology have observed a similar fact in their own religious poetry. One of the most powerful devotional hymns in the language—How Firm a Foundation, Ye Saints of the Lord—is largely indebted for its perpetuity to the fact that almost every line is taken directly from the Bible.

To illustrate the power of this music upon the colored people themselves, I may be permitted to give this little bit of personal experience:

A few nights ago I went to pay a visit to an old "mammy" from Charleston. All her family sat round the room when they found I was from the South. The eldest daughter said: "Bress le Lord! I'm glad to see you! The Norf am no place for people what's been used to eberyting. Nuffin but wuk, wuk, wuk; all's jes money. No fun, nor lub, nor Jesus Christ nowhar! Why, dey'll jes meet you and pass de time ob day, and dey'll let you go away widout eber stoppin' to ax yer ef you's prepared to die, and how's your soul. Why, I neber seed no stranger in Charleston 'thout axin' 'em, how's der soul comin' on? De niggers heah ain't got no Holy Spirit and dey is singing no 'count songs—dese white songs from books."

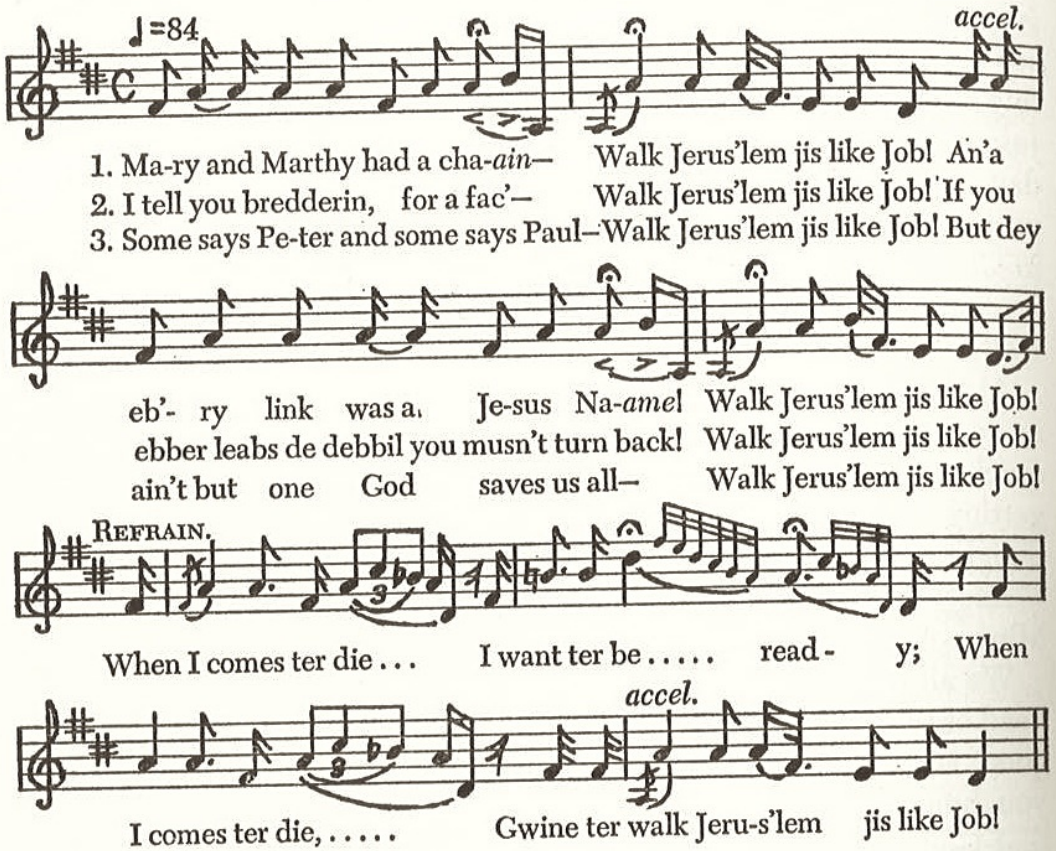
At this juncture I quietly began to sing, "I don't want to be buried in de Storm." Suddenly they all began to sing and pat with me, and quickly adapted their different versions to mine. They lost no time in getting happy. They all jumped up and down in a perfect ecstasy of delight, and shouted, "I feel like de Holy Spirit is right on my hade!"

Another one exclaimed: "People! dem songs makes de har rise up. Mine a-risin' now."

We all had a good time, and I felt greatly complimented when the head of the house explained enthusiastically: "You does shore sing 'em good; and for a white lady you is got a good deal of de Holy Spirit in you, honey"; and before I left the house they had tried to convince me that God has surely blessed this music by taking a hand in forming it himself.

We find many of the genuine negro melodies in Jubilee and Hampton Song Books, but for the uninitiated student of the future there is little or no instruction given, and the white singer in attempting to learn them will make poor work at their mastery; for how is he, poor fellow, to know that it is bad form not to break every law of musical phrasing and notation? What is there to show him that he must make his voice exceedingly nasal and undulating; that around every prominent note he must place a variety of small notes, called "trimmings,"

and he must sing tones not found in our scale; that he must on no account leave one note until he has the next one well under control? He might be tempted, in the *ignorance* of his twentieth-century education, to take breath whenever he came to the end of a line or verse! But this he should never do. By some mysterious power, to be learned only from the negro, he should carry over his breath from line to line and from verse to verse, even at the risk of bursting a blood-vessel. He must often drop from a high note to a very low one; he must be very careful to divide many of his monosyllabic words in two syllables, placing a forcible accent on the last one, so that "dead" will be "da—*ade*," "back" becomes "ba—*ack*," "chain" becomes "ch—*ain*."

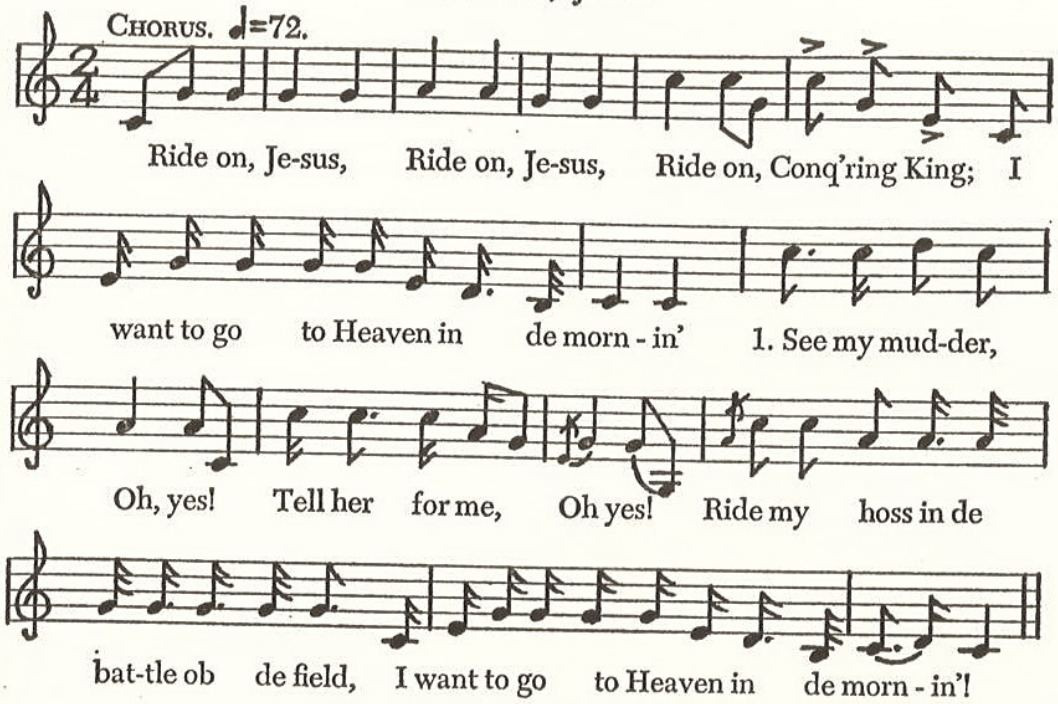


He must also intersperse his singing with peculiar humming sounds —"hum-m-m-m." He will have to learn that the negro never neglects his family relations in his songs, and seldom considers his "spirityul" finished until he has mentioned his father and mother and sister and brother, and his preacher.

A beautiful custom prevails among them of sending messages by the dying to friends gone before into heaven. When a woman dies some friend or relative will kneel down and sing to the soul as it takes its flight. This song contains endless verses, conveying love and kisses

to Aunt Fannie and Uncle Caesar and "Moss Jesus." With omissions it is used upon other occasions with fine effect.

RIDE ON, JESUS



Old Mary, who sang this, was a nurse in our family. She, like most negroes, had no ideas how old she really was. She never worried, though the heavens should fall, and this ignorance as to when their birthdays rolled round may account for their longer lives here and in Africa, and for their not showing their age. She found great difficulty in arranging her religion to suit her morals, and once, in my childish innocence, I remonstrated with her for getting "baptisted" so many times, and she exclaimed indignantly: "I's a Methodist wid a Baptist faith. I gits baptisted ebery summer when de water am rale warm, and I gits turned out ebery winter fur dancin' and stealin', and you would too, child, ef you was a nigger."

A few days ago I asked one of the most scholarly and noted ministers of the colored race, who was visiting in New York, about the negro music. He is very black, and his parents were pure Africans. He said that undoubtedly the tunes came directly from Africa, that his father said he had sung them at home in Africa, and that the tunes were almost supernatural in their hold upon the people. He continued: "Upon condition that you will never tell my name, I'll give you an incident which will prove to you that many of our race are still under the influences of voodooism, and that although I am, as you see, a professed Christian, all the African practices hold a powerful

charm for me which I can't shake off." Knowing well his reputation and position, I was startled. He went on and said:

"And this may serve you some time, as it is a true story of my own weakness. Once the bishop ordered me to the city of ———, where I was to have charge of a run-down church. The first prayer-meeting night the members locked me out, and came with shotguns to the church steps and said they were tired of ministers, that they had had four, and would not have a fifth minister. By dint of eloquence and superior education I obtained their consent to enter the church. Well, I tried faithfully to attract them. I never had more than a handful, and for six months all seemed dead set against me. I could not draw. Completely discouraged, I was in my study praying when the door opened and a little conjure man came in and said softly: 'You don't understand de people. You must get you a hand as a friend to draw 'em. Ef you will let me fix you a luck charm you'll git 'em.' In my desperation, I told him to fix it. He brought the charm back in a few days, and said, 'Now, you must feed it wid alcohol, whisky, or spirits, and never let it git dry, and always wear it nex' your heart when you enters or leaves de church.'

"It was only an ugly piece of red flannel, and I hate to confess it, but I obeyed his instructions. I always felt for it before I went down on my knees to pray. The next Sunday the church was full of people. The following Sabbath there was not standing room. For four years the aisles were crowded every Sunday. I knew it was not the gospel's power, but that wretched 'luck ball.' When the bishop sent me to another church he wrote and said: 'When you came they tried to drive you away with shotguns; here, now twenty men write me begging to have you stay. Now you draw beyond any minister in the city! How is this?' I was ashamed to tell him. I opened the charm, and found these things in it. It was a large piece of red flannel, with a horseshoe magnet fastened flat to it. In the center of the space in the magnet was a bright silver dime. On one side were sewed two needles, on the other side of the money one needle. Below it were two more needles. The whole was covered with what looked and tasted like gunpowder. I tore it up and threw it away, and have never been able to draw an audience since.—You want one? Well, I'll try to get one for you."

"Indeed I want one! What lecturer would not?"

I give this as an instance of the peculiar persistency of African ideas even in enlightened, civilized, Christian minds.

There is a Mrs. R—— in a side street in a Northern town whom I lately visited. She was the most prominent member in the Baptist colored church. She was the leading singer. Another singer got jealous

of her power to holler the loudest; besides, she wanted to get her washing away from her as well as her husband, and, worst of all, *conjured* her. At last the first singer fell sick, and the doctor could do nothing to relieve her. A conjure woman called, and for twenty-five dollars undertook the case. She came in and moaned a few incantations in an unknown tongue. She carried a satchel, and took from it a glass, poured some gin into it and drank a little, and then, holding her hand over it, said:

"Mrs. R——, look inside yourself and tell me what you see."

Mrs. R—— was hypnotized, I suppose, and said, "I see pizen, and snakes a-crawlin'."

"That's right! It's the lady across the way has put the spell on you, and she has cut your shape out in red flannel and stuck it full of pins and needles and biled it. She's trickin' you, and killin' you. But I'll throw it back on her—scatter your spell to the four winds. She has killed a snake and taken the blood and mixed it with wine, and in twenty-four hours it turned into snakes and you drank it and you were going crazy, and your home would have been gone."

It is needless to say the sick woman recovered.

She showed the caul she was born with tied up in a bundle in her stocking. The neighbors were always trying to touch the lump so they could put spells on people and be healed from diseases. The conjure woman also makes luck balls for sale. She tells her customers they must always wear them next their skin on the right side, and keep them wet with "feedin' medicine."

I was so fortunate as to discover the contents of one of her balls. Corn, twine, pepper, a piece of hair from under a black cat's foot, a piece of rabbit's right foot, and whisky—all put into a red flannel bag. This was all inclosed in a buckeye biscuit. She puts loadstones in some of them to draw away a lover from a girl. She also takes roots of several different herbs and flowers and makes them into love powders, and gives them to a darkey lassie to throw upon her truant lover to bring him back to her waiting heart.

It is not to be disputed that Africa has touched in many ways and in divers places the highest civilization of the Old World. I am fully persuaded that in the near future scientific researches will discover among native African tribes traditions which disclose the real parentage of many of the weird stories concerning the Creation and the Flood which are now current among their descendants in this country. The same may be said of "Brer Rabbit" and the "Tar baby," "Brer Fox," "Brer Dog," "Brer Wolf," and all that other wonderful fraternization with animal nature which simple savage life and un-

bridled childish imagination suggest. In many instances they will be found absolutely identified with those that are now told in the wilds of Africa.

To show the existence of this belief among the negroes themselves, I will quote from an old negress, whom I know well, named "Aunt Lucinda":

"Dis is an ole tale. Hit done come down since de Flood. Why, chile, de Bible didn't git eberyting by a good deal—cose it didn't: Us niggers done tole dis in Africk, and Moss John done say de Bible say ef it got all de words Jesus say hit couldn't holt 'em. And dere's lots of tales de Bible didn't git. Dis one now be 'bout de hammer and de ark:

"One time God done tole Moss Nora to build him a ark, case de people fo de Flood was a singin' and a cuttin' up and a givin' entertainments, and God wanted to raise up a better people to a sarve him, and so Moss Nora had to build de ark tight, so de few people wouldn't drown. God tole him to take a he and a she of every kind and fix de jistes tight so de ark wouldn't leak water when de Flood came. De people sat around on de benches a-pokin' fun at him, and dey say, 'Moss Nora, what you doin' ?'

"He says, 'I's a-hammerin' de jistes tight.'

"And de people say, 'What dat you doin' ?'

"And Moss Nora say, 'I got this ark to build, and I gwine to build it.'

"And de people kep' a-pokin' fun. Dey say, 'Moss Nora, what dat hammer say?'

"And he say, 'What it sound to you like it say, humph?'

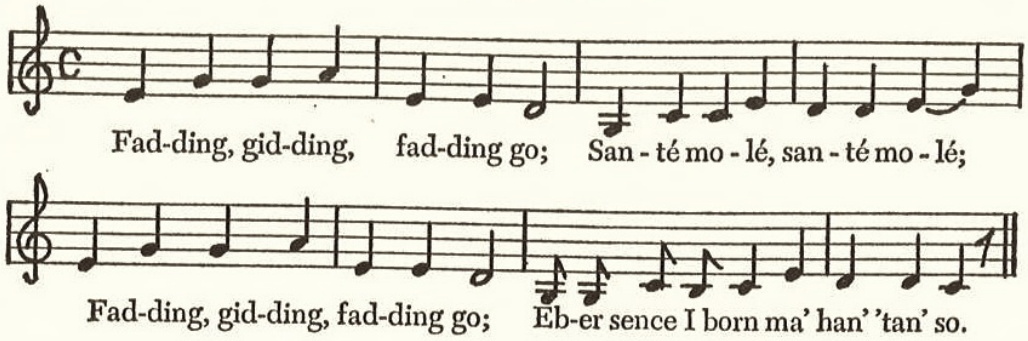
"And de people laugh and say it soun' like it say nuffin but 'Tim—tam! tim—tam!'

"And Moss Nora say: 'Dot's whar you fotch up wrong. I got ter build this ark so tight de water won't leak thoo, and de people won't fall out, and dat hammer don't say "Tim—tam," no sich ting. Hit say ebery time I hits de jistes, "Repent! repent!" '

"Dere's a spiritual what goes long wid it too, honey, 'bout de hammer and de nails, but I don't know it. Hit's a ole, ole story dat we been singin' since de Flood—jes come down from mouf to mouf. Hist de Window is a ole tune, but not ole like dis one. Hit come jis like I tole you."

In regard to one song, at least, I have irrefragable proof of its African origin. Mrs. Jefferson Davis tells me her old nurse was a full-blooded African named Aunt Dinah. She would lovingly put her little charge to sleep with this doggerel:

FADDING, GIDDING



Aunt Dinah would also sing it pleadingly when begging for a present. She would begin the supplication with hands clinched tight, and open them quickly at the last line. She declared that she always sang it in this exact manner in her old African home whenever she was asking a favor, but she was never able to tell the meaning of any part of it except the last line, the African of which she had forgotten, but which meant that all black races are born with wide-open palms ready and waiting for other peoples to pour rich gifts into them. This she translated in her apt, crude way: "Eber since I born, my hand stand so!"

She had a relative named Moses, I think, who had three deep gashes radiating from each eye. Of these he was very proud, as he said they indicated that he was of the king's blood.

Ten days have elapsed since the above was written. I feel like crying, "Eureka!" I have found my proof! After a diligent search for a real live African, I have found an educated convert to Christianity, who has been absent only two years from the wilds of the west coast of Africa. In broken English he sang for me several songs sung by the savages of the native Mendi tribe. The tunes sounded much like songs I know, but I could not take them down during this interview. All the songs I sang he said seemed very familiar—in certain portions especially so.

I was especially interested in the description he gave of a peculiar ceremony common among the wildest Bushmen and the Yolloff tribe. My informant grew up and played with them a great deal when a child. He says the death of a young boy they consider an affront to the living—an affront which they never forgive. It is singular that among some of our Indian tribes a similar notion prevails. The friends meet around the corpse and exclaim, while they chant and sing and dance, in a high-pitched voice: "Why did you die? Were you too proud to stay with us? You thought yourself too good

to stay with us. To whom do you leave all your things? We don't want them! Take them with you if you are so stuck up; we'll bury them with you!"

They work themselves into a perfect fury, and one gets a whip and flogs the corpse until it is horribly mutilated. Then the few who have really been friends to the child in their crude way draw near and begin to sing:

Anasa yi.
Anasa papa,

which this native African assured me meant, as nearly as he could translate it:

Find out how mother is.
Find out how papa is.

The curious identity of the name for father in this African dialect and our own he could not explain.

Even while the relatives were thus speaking kindly to the departed child, others would come up with whips, and with blows spitefully exclaim: "Tell my father's sister I am happy. Speak to her for me." This they said, mocking the relatives for sending messages.

What better proof is required of the origin of the peculiar custom of the negroes in our own Southland of sending communications by the dead? He also gave me new stories of Brother Conch, and a tale of a rabbit and a pitch-man.

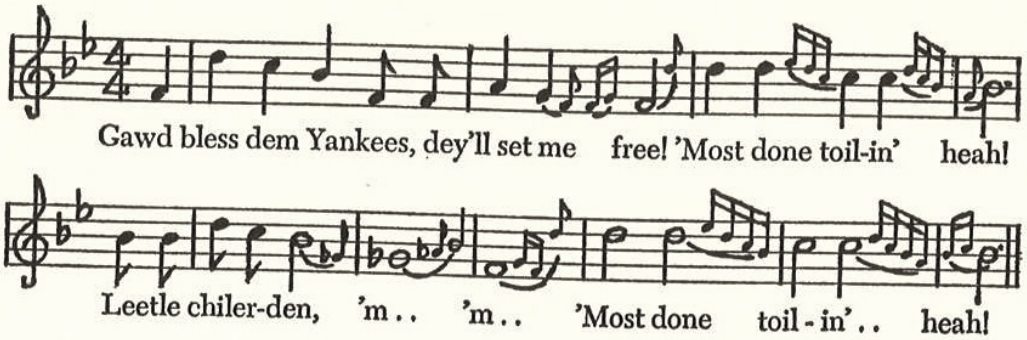
He says he has heard a savage tribe often sing to the beat of a peculiar drum, as they started to pillage and destroy a neighboring tribe, these words, which he could not translate:

Zo, whine, whine,
Zo, bottom balleh.
Zo, whine, whine,
Zo, bottom balleh.

Some of the tribes are followers of Mohammed. After they have broken their fast, they sing this hymn to their God:

Li, li, e li li,
Moo moo dooroo, soo moo li.

I then sang for him a part of "Gawd bless dem Yankees, dey'll set me free," and when I came to the humming, which we all know is the marked peculiarity of the negro singing, he stopped me and said, "Whenever you hum that way it means 'Hush!' and among



the tribes I have known it always comes in baby songs." He then sang this one, which a heathen woman used to sing to his little sister "Amber":

Amber in a wa,
Keen yah feenyah ma,
Amber in a bamboo carri,
Amber eeka walloo.
Um, um, um.

A rough translation of this means: "Amber, be quiet and I'll give you something. I'm not going to flog you. You are quiet, so I thank you. Hush, hush, hush!"